

Being a 140-Year-Old Startup

I am often asked what it means to be working to keep Austin in a “140-year-old startup” mindset. It does sound a little strange at first. How can a company born of the industrial revolution and at the center of so many early 20th century industrial-plant advancements be a “start-up”?

Instead, it seems being in the small club of 100+-year-old companies still operating puts Austin on the other end of the cultural spectrum.

That thought is mistaken though. In fact, it's been our teams' commitment through the years to stay focused on that “start-up” culture that has allowed Austin to stay in operation. Despite these many years in business, we haven't—and won't—be dragged away from who we are. And today we remain committed to keeping the start-up culture alive in our 140-year-old organization.

So, what does it mean to be a “140-year-old start-up”? It means we maintain a startup culture. We understand, embrace, honor, learn from, and are proud of our long and successful history. We don't forget what we are and how we got here (and the lessons we've learned along the way). We don't change our values, or our drive, or our energy and innovative spirit. We aspire to emulate the teams that came before us—who set the bar high. We rise to (and exceed) their standards. It means we don't become complacent, lose interest, or slow down, or stop, but instead stay on the leading edge of our industry and work in every way we can to maintain that “start-up” spirit of enterprise and culture that shaped our success. We don't view decades of sustained success as justification for resting on our laurels—ever.

Close your eyes and think of a start-up. What you see in your mind is much of what we keep at our core here at Austin. Things like:

- **Innovation.** At the core of a start-up is displacement, disruption, and solving real problems with true innovation. This aptly describes the root of Austin's culture—who we have been since our foundation, and who we want to remain.

Standing still is dying (a common refrain), and from our founder forward we have never been a company that stands still. Austin has led the way for the industry—and will continue to lead. We don't innovate simply for the sake of innovation. As the saying goes, a solution in search of a problem is often the worst kind. And this is true for Austin too. We aren't in laboratories—we're in the world, designing, building and maintaining plants and facilities, changing the face of the Earth. We identify true problems, true areas of innovation, and focus our work around them.

- **Passion.** Start-ups are brought to life and brought to success from dreams, passion for the mission, sweat and drive (and often credit cards). People working at start-ups aren't usually chasing money as their solution—they care more about the work and their peers than the perks. Of course, they hope the money and perks will come someday, but they chase the work itself (as valuable in itself because of what it accomplishes). They care more about the vision, the mission, and their peers than their salary. They get more excited about being part of a team where likeminded people all row in the same direction.

At Austin, we're a little blessed in this sense. We have the unique opportunity and responsibility

of changing the face of the Earth for the benefit of mankind every day, in all that we do. Plants designed and built by Austin produce products that feed millions, allow millions to have transportation, bring the news of the day to millions, save and improve the quality of life for millions through medicine, and help defend freedom.

Our trick is to never let day-to-day tasks allow us to lose sight of the importance of our work.

- **Action.** Startups are driven by action, often bold action. Incumbent (aka “older”) companies are often less prone to action, because they have more to lose, an existing cash flow, and less drive to take action, especially bold action. While incumbent leaders/companies sit back and evaluate the risk and build consensus, the start-up takes action, disrupts, and prepares to pass the incumbent and leave it wondering “what happened.” We are action takers (bold action takers) because we have an action culture.

Austin has more to lose than a brand-new start up, and we have to balance that. But we also have the benefit of years of lessons learned, experience, and an existing cash flow that can all be quickly leveraged for successful, effective action. Inaction and indecision simply don’t work for us. Austin’s dynamic teams work together, and quickly come to intelligent recommendations that support prompt, effective action.

- **Love the Customer.** Start-ups love their customers. Think about it., In the early days of a business, customers aren’t “just customers” to the business, they validate the founders’ vision, and confirm that all the effort is worth it. They also help steer the ship along the path of growth by providing essential lessons about what works and what doesn’t. Courageous entrepreneurs risking everything to make their dream a reality view customers as partners, and part of the family—since everyone knows those customers are very directly putting food on the team’s table. Startup teams adopt customers and work to do whatever is necessary and feasible to help them. Startups must win the hearts and minds of their customers, because loyal customers allow them to survive and thrive. Startups must go out of their way to ensure their product or service serves the customer above expectations.

At Austin, these values and approach were set in our DNA early. Samuel Austin was a religious man, and his early days in the business were built on service, on delivering the highest quality, and doing good for those who honored Austin by selecting the company as their contractor to bring their own vision to life.

Today we follow the same mission, we stay highly engaged in pertinent industry organizations, and, although some project owners (customers) look at us a little funny, we’re always digging to find the project’s business drivers, goals, and mission. We strive to be the partner helping drive project owners’ success—beyond any single project. We value owners who partner with us, and we always work to keep them more than happy with their selection of our family/team.

- **Persistence.** Most success in life depends on persistence and determined dedication in facing challenges and getting to the right result. For startup enterprises persistence and perseverance are perhaps the most important qualities of all. Entrepreneurs running new enterprises intuitively understand the road ahead is hard as hell and filled with obstacles and potential disasters. But they commit to the process anyway, knowing that “getting it done” is well worth

the struggle—because accomplishing big things (solving real problems for lots of people) rewards everyone involved.

Startups that morph into stable, successful companies don't get there without a heavy dose of persistence—the commitment to stick with it until the objective is attained (no matter how hard, complicated or overwhelming things get). This attribute is hardwired into the successful startup mindset. And they don't *stay* successful in building customer visions (no matter how often they succeed) unless the element of persistence remains strong and is deliberately sustained.

Austin remains a startup enterprise at heart after 140 years because we “get” the imperative of persistence and deliberately cultivate it in our approach to attaining client objectives and resolving challenges. We don't give up in the face of obstacles, uncertainty or discomfort. We view them as challenges, knowing that the right ideas, attention—and sweat—get us to the right outcome. Great achievements aren't possible without persistence, and the harder the challenge, the more significant the outcome. This is what informs our processes.

- **Teams.** Startups hang in the balance of team building. Austin's founder knew that without the great team players working in sync with each other, success for the company was a dim prospect. Mr. Austin always carefully assembled his teams with the aim of high efficiency, function, energy, and purpose. Without effective, collaborative teams not much gets done—or worse, disaster looms.

Accomplishing client missions takes having the right people on the project in the right positions. Teams that work well have the right players, well-aligned visions and personalities (and that don't conflict), and players capable of accommodating intense interaction and who understand the value of getting to the right result for the project—as opposed to doing what's right for them. Successful teams are successful collaborators. It's all about serving the mission, not advancing personal, parochial agendas.

For startups, getting teams right isn't a choice. It's a key to winning deals and getting results. The minute a company falls away from focusing on the caliber and composition of teams assembled to produce project outcomes, is the minute it begins failing to generate the outstanding results clients expect. Austin's teams know this and live it. This is why we're still acting like a startup after 140 years.

If your organization is one year or 100 years old, or anything in between, developing or keeping that startup culture takes constant vigilance. The Austin Company is a 140-year-old startup. Does your organization retain its startup character?

I'd love to hear from you on this topic. Please email us if you would like to share your story. We are nowhere near perfect, but are more than happy to share our experiences and lessons learned on building and keeping a startup culture in a century-old organization—something we constantly work on.